

**Social class and descriptive representation in Parliament:
Some new methodological insights**

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Abstract

Research on the political representation of socially disadvantaged groups has strongly focused on women and ethnic minorities while social classes have been underexposed. There are some good reasons for this: the declining relevance of class in modern society, the incorporation of class interests in political parties and the way researchers have been struggling with operationalising the social class of parliamentarians. In this paper, we will try to answer these objections and will demonstrate a method to overcome the methodological difficulties.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, politicians and political scientists alike devote increasing attention to the socio-demographic representativeness of political institutions. The under-representation of specific groups in political institutions is considered to be a democratic problem of justice, legitimacy, responsiveness and effectiveness (Phillips 1995). Research on the (descriptive) political representation of socially disadvantaged groups has in recent years strongly focused on women and ethnic minorities (e.g. Rule and Zimmerman 1994; Anwar 2001; Dahlerup 2007; Togeby 2008). The political representation of social groups defined on the basis of social class is less analysed and, when analysed, the method of delineating social classes is not specified or a country-specific classification is used which renders cross-country research difficult (Norris 1996; Costa and Kerrouche 2007).

There are some good reasons for this underexposure: the declining relevance of class in modern society, the incorporation of class interests in political parties and the way researchers have been struggling with operationalising the social class of parliamentarians. In this article, we will try to answer these objections and will demonstrate a method to overcome the methodological difficulties. To this end, we will make an appeal to the sociological literature on social stratification. Separately from the abundant research on political representation, a wealthy empirical and theoretical

literature in this field has been developed throughout the years (Grusky and Ku 2008). Aspects such as classifying and delineating social classes have been major scholarly preoccupations in this research domain. Surprisingly, research on the political representation of classes has been blind to insights from the literature on social stratification. This lack of connection could also be held responsible for the limited research attention to the political representation of social classes. It is our aim in this article to denote the kinship between these two domains of research and to shed a light on the potential and difficulties associated with combining these into (comparative) research. Additionally, the need to reconsider the political representation of social classes will be stressed.

Firstly, political representation and the lack of attention to social class will be discussed. In the next three sections it will be indicated why the political representation of social classes has not been extensively researched up to now and these objections will be countered. Finally, a proposal for how to combine social stratification research and representation research will be put forward and a first empirical test on data from the Belgian parliament will be presented.

2. Representation

Political representation is a central concept in political science. The concrete operationalisation of this concept has, however, been the subject of fierce scientific discussion. The general meaning of political representation refers to making present in a political forum someone or something that is absent. How this should be translated in practice is less clear. The distinction between descriptive and substantial representation, made for the first time by Pitkin in 1967, is still relevant today.

According to the *descriptive representation* approach, the composition of parliament should be such that it corresponds to the composition of society. Parliament should in this vision be a mirror or a miniature version of society. A member of parliament (MP) represents someone by matching him or her on a relevant attribute or characteristic, such as gender, ethnic origin, religion or class. It matters in this approach what MPs are, rather

than what they are doing. Scholarly attention in this vision has centered on the actual and historical composition of parliament: how many women, how many farmers etc. there are in parliament (Best and Cotta 2000), the barriers disadvantaged groups have to overcome (Norris 1996), and instruments to overcome this unfavorable situation (Krook 2007).

Substantive representation, on the other hand, focuses on what MPs are doing in parliament. Representation is seen as ‘acting for others, an activity in behalf of, in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else’ (Pitkin 1967: 113). It is about acting in accordance with the interests and points of view of (a selected part of) the electorate. A member of parliament represents someone whose interests (s)he defends without necessarily having the same profile as those who (s)he represents. For instance, a male MP who defends women’s rights represents women in parliament in a substantive manner.

In this article we will focus on descriptive representation. Descriptive representation is important for two reasons. Firstly, the division between descriptive and substantive representation is less sharp than suggested by the discussion above. In general, one expects that the role orientations and background characteristics of MPs correlate (Thomassen and Andeweg 2004). Research on the behavior of female and black MPs has shown that they have a greater chance of devoting attention to issues that are important for women (Celis 2006 ; Owens 2005).

This link can theoretically be explained by the theory of ‘politics of presence’ (Phillips 1995). A common life experience and a common structural position in society are the central elements of this approach. By having experience with similar problems and phenomena and having suffered from a common disadvantaged structural position, people are more likely to devote attention to the issues of their social group. Life experience causes understanding of and familiarity with the specific needs and problems of a social group and with possible solutions. Therefore, the chance that an MP will defend the interests of the group to which he or she belongs is likely to be high. However, the link between both forms of representation continues to be one of the most hotly-disputed in political science (Mackay 2004).

Secondly, descriptive representation is symbolically important. In every political system there is a claim to legitimacy that is based on the belief that citizens can trust government not to act in a way that permanently violates their interests. Subordinate groups in society, however, do not always receive enough attention for their interests from the dominant groups due to structural inequalities. Because descriptive representatives of these subordinate social groups will be likely to be affected themselves by the legislation that they help to frame and pass, their presence in parliament could be seen as a guarantee for the consideration of the interests of that social group (Williams 1998). The descriptive representatives' own interests as citizens bind them to the interests of their constituents. In that sense, an enhancement in the descriptive representation of social groups is symbolically important as it has the potential to increase trust among these social groups (Pantoja and Segura 2003).

Research on the representation of subordinate social groups has in recent years strongly focused on women and ethnic minorities (e.g. Rule and Zimmerman, 1994; Anwar 2001; Dahlerup 2007; Togeby 2008). The political representation of social classes has been underexposed. There are three main reasons for this neglect. Each of these reasons will subsequently be discussed and then countered in this article.

3. The relevance of class in contemporary society

Before questioning the current significance of social class, the concept will first be briefly explained. Social stratification is a ubiquitous phenomenon found in every society. It refers to the division of a society into several social layers with a clear hierarchy between them. The system of social stratification stands for the complex of social institutions that creates and maintains inequalities of different types (amongst others on the social and political level). It is built upon goods and characteristics that are highly valued in a particular society in one particular era. These goods and characteristics differ across time and between places (Grusky and Ku 2008). In the Middle Ages, for instance, land ownership was an asset that was highly valued. Some authors, such as Marx and Dahrendorf (1959), have focused on one single variable as the basis for social stratification, respectively the division between labor and capital, and the distribution of

authority. Other approaches have tried to make a synthesis of different goods and competences the basis for social stratification (Grusky and Ku 2008). Research has revealed that in contemporary industrial society, professional occupation can serve as such an integrative indicator (Parkin 1971; Grusky and Ku 2008). Many of the goods, rewards and instruments that are relevant for social position can be directly (salary, etc.) or indirectly (prestige, status, etc.) related to this variable. Groups classified according to this variable are named 'social classes'.

The concept of social class links scientifically the socio-economic structure individuals are part of and their everyday life. Individuals who are confronted with comparable socio-economic conditions share a position in the system of social stratification. The potential and limits of their behaviour and life chances are, due to their socio-economic position, similar. The impact is enormous: it affects, among other things, the housing situation, voting behaviour (Van der Waal et al. 2007), health situation, education (Lareau 2003), cultural tastes and participation (Bourdieu 1984), school results, and eating habits (Scholliers 1997). Grusky (1994: 19) even concludes: 'One would be hard-pressed to identify any aspect of human experience that sociologists have not linked to class-based variables in some way.'

It might be clear by now that the impact of social class reaches further than the economic sphere; it encompasses all aspects of human life. But class has become a contested concept in modern society. There has been a fierce discussion since the 1950s about the relevance of class in post-industrial society. It is stated that owing to a democratisation of society and an increase in education, class differences have lost much of their sharpness. In this view, identity is no longer dominated by class, which only has relevance in historical perspective (Nisbet 1959; Dahrendorf 1959; Clark and Lipset 1991; Pakulski and Waters 1996).

Despite the wide scientific support for the idea of the waning relevance of class, this has been contradicted by empirical research results that show people with a similar class background continue to encounter similar problems and drawbacks (Marshall 1990; De Witte 1997; Goldthorpe and McKnight 2004). These empirical findings, which prove the

current relevance of class, have been countered by yet other social scientists. They assert that the effects of class still exist in society, but that it no longer corresponds with a class identity (Savage et al. 2001; Botero and Irwin 2003). Class differences do still occur, but no longer determine the increasingly individualised self-identity of people. However, (self)identification is the key factor in explaining representation and in justifying the need to be descriptively represented (Phillips 1995).

Yet another opinion in the recent class literature posits that people have multiple identities with no fixed hierarchy (Klandermans 2001). Since class is too diffuse and too broad a category for the development of a class identity, additional sources of identification, such as living in a working-class neighbourhood or working in the same company, become important. This importance of additional identifiers has always been present in history but some traditional additional sources of information (urban area, etc.) about class are no longer effective. An approach that demonstrates that additional identifiers can still influence class identity begins with the concept of ‘occupational community’ (Strangleman 2001; MacKenzie et al. 2006). This concept is more narrow than class and includes, for instance, only local steel workers instead of all blue collar workers. Studies on mass redundancies show that former steelworkers continue to identify themselves with their previous employment category. This group identity is based on a sense of distinction, but rather than leading to particularism based on the occupational community, it serves as a mechanism through which class-based thinking and class-based identity are articulated. In that sense it allows for the recognition of a common structural location and problems shared with other workers (MacKenzie et al. 2006). Identification with the smaller occupational community functions in this view as a useful stepping-stone for identification with the broader social class.

By now it has become clear that the existence of and identification with social class is at least controversial. Nevertheless, a study reveals that 89 per cent of employees estimate that a labour class still exists in Belgium (De Weerdt and De Witte 2004). The same study shows that more than 56 per cent of the respondents identify themselves with a particular social class.

4. The party as safeguard for class interests

Another factor hindering research on representation of social classes, and blue collar workers in particular, is the fact that social class forms one of the cleavages on which the division of the political spectrum into political parties is built (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). As a consequence, the labour class and the political party claiming to defend their interests are to a certain extent intertwined, which makes individual representation less urgent (Phillips 1995). The interests of blue collar workers are historically to a large extent incorporated in labour parties, which renders these parties, rather than individual representatives, crucial actors in defending the interests of this class (Ludlam and Taylor 2003). In this view, there is no need to have blue collar workers in parliament. The presence of descriptive representatives is, according to Phillips (1995), especially relevant when the interests of a social group have not yet reached the political arena, which is not the case for labourers.

There are, however, recent developments both within parties and within the electorate that contradict this self-evident link.

Firstly, there is the shift of political parties in the direction of ‘catch-all parties’ (Kirchheimer 1966; Katz and Mair 1995). Parties are no longer exclusively tied to one particular social group, but aim to attract a broad range of voters (‘the median voter’) by adopting an ideologically more vague profile. In this way they seek to broaden their electoral potential. Although the catch-all thesis seems to be valid for all kinds of parties, it is striking that such analyses are mainly applied to labour parties. These changes in the social-democratic party platforms, which started in the 1970s, are inevitable consequences of the parties’ quest for votes in combination with the declining share of labourers in society. As a consequence of willing to attract a broader pool of potential voters, social democratic parties were forced to de-emphasize their unique appeal which had made them the principal political expression of the interests of the labour class (Przeworski & Sprague, 1988 ; Ilonszki, 2007). In an analysis of the election manifestos of social-democratic parties in a large number of European countries, Volkens (2004) found a clear shift over time to the right and an increasing attention for topics related to the Third Way approach (decentralization, government efficiency, social justice, etc.).

For the representation of labourers' interest this waning link could be a catastrophe: it implies that their guarantee on substantive representation diminishes since labour parties are no longer exclusively focused on their particular social group.

Secondly, also from the side of the labourers themselves, the link with social-democratic parties is questioned: labour parties seem to be less accepted by blue collar workers as a spokesperson for their interests than they used to be (Houtman et al. 2008). People from the labour class tend to vote in declining numbers for labour parties. This phenomenon is denoted as the 'death of class voting' (e.g. Clark & Lipset, 1991), but recent research has revealed that reality is more subtle than this. It has been found that income continues to determine to a large extent the socio-economic viewpoints (role of trade unions, organisation of social security system, etc.) of voters, but also that the level of education impacts on the opinion about socio-cultural topics (civil rights for ethnic minorities, etc.). Social class correlates strongly with both income and education (Van der Waal et al., 2007). Earlier a seminal study of Lipset (1959) showed that the working class is progressive on economic topics and conservative on social or morel issues.

Socio-cultural issues, on which lower-educated people (which are more prevalent among the labour class) tend to take a conservative stance, have become over time more important than socio-economic issues in determining voting behaviour. As a consequence, low educated labourers no longer recognise themselves in the viewpoints of the labour parties, which often take a progressive stance on socio-cultural issues. On the contrary, blue collar workers vote more for conservative parties and even extreme right parties, whose opinions in socio-cultural issues tend to be more in line with their own opinions. However, these conservative parties often do not defend their interests in socio-economic issues.

In sum, class voting continues to exist, but is overruled by socio-cultural voting. As a result, the logical connection between working class and labour parties is at least partially broken off by the voters.

5. Methodological problems

Yet another factor influencing the absence of social class in recent literature on representation is a methodological one. Since it is unclear for many researchers how to

operationalise this concept, they refrain from an analysis of class. In this section, we will first indicate how social class could be operationalised in general. Next, it will be investigated how this operationalisation can be used in research on political representation. We are inspired here by the literature on social stratification.

Two broad groups of approaches around social class can be discerned. On one hand, there is the (neo)Marxist approach, which states that the exploitation of the labour class by the capitalists results in an antagonistic social divide between these two classes. The capitalist class possesses the raw materials and the means of production, while people of the labour class only have their own labour force. This division causes unequal relations between these two classes and even results in clear hostility between them. This class conflict is, in the Marxist view, the universal force that structures society in all its aspects. This approach is, however, at odds with the existence of the middle class.

On the other hand, there is the (neo)Weberian approach. The starting point of this approach is, like the (neo)Marxist approach, that social classes are based upon the ownership of and control over economically-relevant goods and qualities. The market value of these goods and qualities plays a crucial role in the exchange process on the economic market that determines one's social position. Belonging to a social class is not a predetermined, fixed factor, as in the (neo)Marxist view, but depends upon the social appreciation of certain attributes. Class relations are, also contrary to the (neo)Marxist view, not necessarily antagonistic, nor is class the all-determining factor in society. Moreover, in this view, the number of classes can be higher than two.

There are several possible methods to operationalise social class. Both the selection of the criteria used to make a distinction and the actual delineation of the different classes constitute problems that have been puzzling social stratification researchers for decades (Norris 1996; Anthias 2001; Wright 2005). A social class is not an objective fact, as sex is, but a social construction based on similarities in life chances, social functions and living conditions.

The most used classification scheme is the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) schema, which assigns class positions on the basis of occupational position (Erikson et al.

1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). This schema, which is part of the (neo)Weberian approach, considers both the occupation itself and the interpersonal relationships associated with it (degree of autonomy, number of employees, etc.). Occupations with similar requirements regarding human capital and with similar levels of monitoring problems are classified in the same social class. Several versions of this schema exist, presenting three, five, seven, nine or 11 classes (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). It is important to note that, contrary to Marxist analyses, there is no hierarchy between the different classes.

There are, however, three main problems which render the EGP-schema not suitable for the comparative analysis of the representation of social classes in parliaments. Firstly, unlike ethnicity and gender, the social class of a person can change. In practice, however, this ‘social mobility’ is rather limited due to several structural factors (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). A parliamentary mandate, however, has become a full-time profession with a higher than average income (King 1981; De Winter and Brans 2003). As a consequence, blue collar workers who succeed in becoming elected for parliament jump almost automatically to a higher social class (Phillips 1995). This does not necessarily hamper the influence of the cultural and political identity linked to their previous social class. Life experiences acquired in previous social classes remain relevant: the consciousness and expertise necessary for defining and defending a group’s interests are not lost all of a sudden when someone becomes an MP (Celis and Wauters 2008). Ideally, descriptive analyses should take the whole professional career of parliamentarians into account. Practical problems, however, often constitute an obstacle for this kind of analysis. As a consequence, researchers are often forced to consider only the most recent profession of a person, which frequently is already a salaried political function.

Secondly, as explained above, the EGP schema also takes the interpersonal aspects of one’s occupation into consideration. Both the human capital needed for the job and the supervisory responsibilities are considered when determining the EGP-class of a person. Typically, the latter aspect can only be found by means of a survey. The degree of autonomy and/or the number of employees cannot be simply derived from the job title. This causes problems, especially in historical perspective: biographic datasets of

parliamentarians often contain data on occupation, but never indicate the degree of autonomy nor the number of employees.

Thirdly, there has not existed a commonly agreed and validated way of operationalising the EGP schema across countries (Bihagen et al. 2006). This lack of consensus renders cross-country analyses difficult if not impossible.

As a reaction to this latter argument, the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) project has recently developed an operationalisation of the EGP class schema which is designed to be used across Europe (Harrison and Rose 2006; Bihagen et al. 2006; Rose and Harrison 2007). The development of this ESeC class schema involved the collaboration of national experts from different European countries and has led to a system for allocating occupations from national and cross-national data. Compared with the EGP schema, ESeC provides a more thorough validation and better documentation for comparative purposes (Harrison and Rose 2006).

There are two methods to derive the ESeC code of a person: the full method, which uses the occupation code, the employment status and the size of the organisation as indicators, and the simplified method, which uses only the occupation code (typically an ISCO88-code). Although the full method is more appropriate since it takes more elements into account, the simplified method provides a solution when only occupational data are available (Harrison and Rose 2006), as is the case in research on descriptive representation in parliament (see above). Therefore, the Simplified class version (SC version), as this method is labeled, seems suitable for comparative analyses of class-based political representation. Moreover, there is an overall correspondence between the full version and the simplified version of almost 80 per cent (Harrison and Rose 2006). The only category for which the simplified classification deviates strongly from the full version is the ESeC 6 category (lower supervisory and lower technician occupations).

There are ESeC versions with nine, six, five and three categories. Class 10 (never worked) may always be added as an additional category in any of these models, if desired.

<< Table 1 about here >>

6. A first empirical application

A first empirical application of the ESeC schema to studying the descriptive representation of social classes will now be developed. For this analysis we utilised the biographic dataset of the Belgian House of Representatives. This dataset has been compiled by that institution and contains data on sex, profession, education, etc. of (former) members. In our analysis, the complete professional career of the parliamentarians is taken into account. ISCO88-codes were assigned on the basis of occupational titles, and subsequently on the basis of these ISCO88-codes ESeC-codes were granted. This exercise was done twice in order to check for mistakes.

The analysis is run on a yearly-basis, instead of on the basis of a parliamentary term. By running a yearly analysis, intermediate substitutions, which happens frequently, can be included in the analysis. The situation on 1 January is taken as a reference.

Both the analyses with nine categories as well as with three categories are presented in graphs below (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). It immediately strikes the eye that categories belonging to the working class are not well represented in parliament and never have been. Hence there is no dramatic decline in the descriptive representation of the labour class since the Second World War: their share in parliament has always been rather low. Moreover, the figures below also reveal a clear and marked stability in the descriptive representation of social classes throughout the years. There are hardly any dramatic decreases nor impressive increases in the representation of one social class or another. These two findings point us to a long-term under-representation of the working class in the Belgian parliament. This marked stability in the long run and the apparent lack of concern from both the labour class and society throws up the question of whether social class is indeed relevant for descriptive representation. Part of this phenomenon could, however, be explained by an incorporation of the interests of the labour class in one particular party whose main objective has been the defence of these interests. As explained above, due to the declining link between social-democratic parties and the labour class, a theoretical reasoning similar to that for the representation of women and

ethnic minorities could be made. Consequently, questions concerning representation of social classes come to the fore.

As for the methodological part, it can be concluded from the Belgian case that for research about the descriptive representation of the Salariat (higher social classes), an analysis using nine categories is more appropriate. Such a categorisation is, at least for the Belgian situation, more informative than an analysis with three categories, where the share of this highest class is very gradually increasing from an already high level. A nine-category classification exhibits more fluctuations and marked increasing and decreasing trends for these classes at the top level.

As for analyses of the descriptive representation of the Working Class, a three-category classification seems more useful. The share in parliament for each working class category separately is too low in a nine-category classification system to identify meaningful evolutions over time and to avoid particularistic explanations for phenomena that are thought to have a broader relevance.

<< Figure 1 about here >>

The choice for a particular categorisation of course depends on the research question at stake. When one conducts research about the presence of labourers in the Belgian parliament, a three-category classification is most appropriate, while if one is interested in higher social classes, a nine-category classification can be used.

<< Figure 2 about here >>

7. Conclusions

The study of descriptive representation in parliament of social classes has long been neglected. The perceived waning relevance of class in contemporary society, the prominent role of the labour-capital cleavage for the formation and positioning of parties and difficulties in operationalising the social class of parliamentarians can be held accountable for this neglect. It has been argued in this article that class is still relevant in

contemporary society and that due to the ‘catch-all’ approach of (social-democratic) parties and the lower levels of recognition of blue-collar workers in the viewpoints of labour parties, the parliamentary presence of individuals of a particular social class regains relevance. It seems obvious that this area of research merits more attention, especially since social class continues to function as one of the attributes on which political oppression is built. As Phillips (1995: 171) stated: ‘The most persistent structure of political exclusion is surely that associated with inequalities of social class’.

When scholars did attempt to investigate the descriptive representation of social classes, they often struggled with aspects related to the classification and delineation of these classes. Often they designed their own or a country-specific classification scheme, which of course hampers cross-country research. Surprisingly, research on the political representation of classes has been blind to insights from the literature on social stratification for which these issues have been major preoccupations. In this article, we proposed to use the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC), an instrument developed by social stratification research. In particular, the Simplified class version of this schema is apt for analysing the social class of MPs in a comparative perspective, since only the occupation code is needed.

The new approach to studying the political representation of social classes presented in this article could be helpful for a wide range of possible future analyses, both for single-country studies and for cross-national studies. Both the descriptive representation as such, as well as the effects of the presence in parliament of social classes on, for example, their substantive representation or on trust in parliament by people belonging to a particular social class, could be examined by using the framework presented here. Given the argument for the relevance of social class for political representation, this constitutes a promising area for further research.

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Table 1: European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC): versions with nine, six, five and three categories (Source: Harrison and Rose, 2006)

ESeC Class: 9 categories	Code	6 categories	5 categories	3 categories
Higher salariat	1	Salariat	Salariat	Salariat
Lower salariat	2			
Higher grade white collar	3	Intermediate employee	Intermediate employee	Intermediate class
Higher grade blue collar	6			
Petit bourgeois and independents	4	Small employers and self-employed	Small employers and self-employed	
Farmers	5			
Lower grade white collar	7	Lower grade white collar	Lower grade white collar	Working class
Skilled workers	8	Skilled workers	Lower technical and routine occupations	
Semi- and non-skilled workers	9	Semi- and non-skilled workers		
Never worked	10	Never worked	Never worked	Never worked

Figure 1: Members of the Belgian House of Representatives by social class (ESeC-schema nine-category classification) (1946-2007)

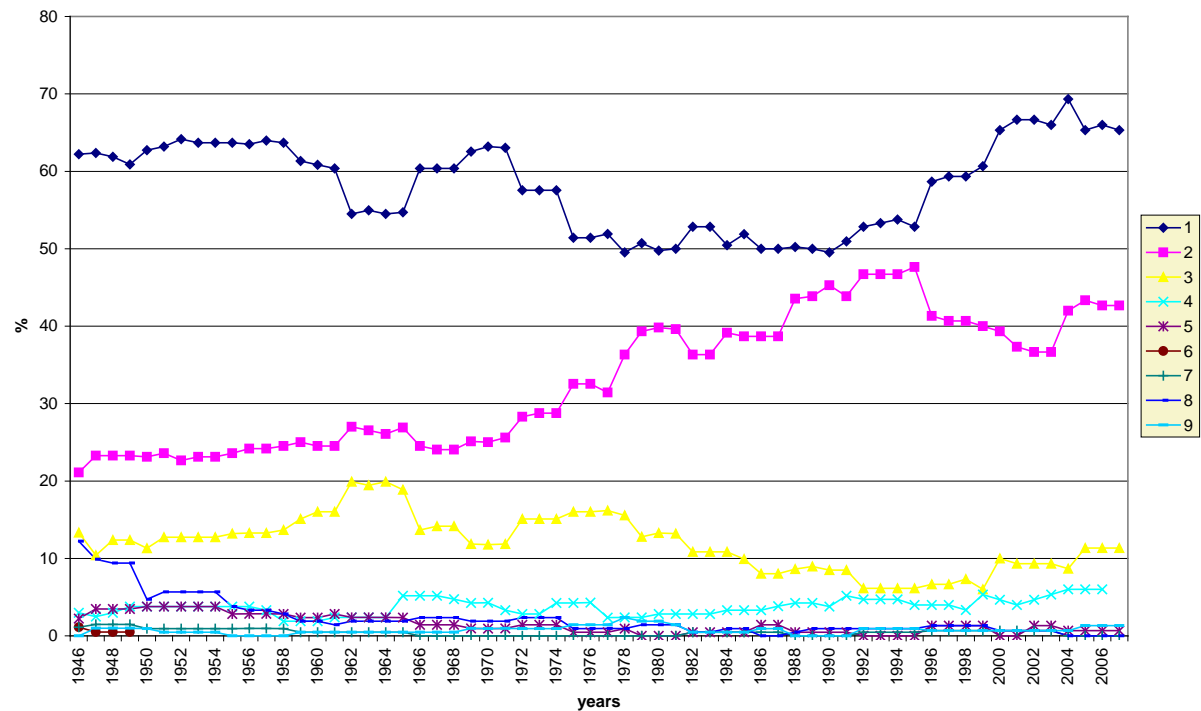


Figure 2: Members of the Belgian House of Representatives by social class (ESeC-schema three-category classification) (1946-2007)

